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**Americal Division’s Bravo Battery’s Brave Defense of LZ Snoopy During the Vietnam War**

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Snoopy, the dog in Charles Schultz’s popular *Peanuts* comic strip, regularly fights imaginary battles with the Red Baron and just as regularly loses the fight. For the artillerymen at LZ Snoopy in the spring of 1969, however, there was nothing at all imaginary about the Red Baron. He was only too real, in the form of the VC guerrillas and NVA soldiers in the area. And for the artillerymen, losing was not an option.

The early part of May 1969 was a period of relative calm in the southern portion of I Corps. For the men of the U.S. Army 23rd Infantry (Americal) Division’s Bravo Battery, 1st Battalion, 82nd Artillery, and Company C, 39th Engineer Battalion, it was a time to continue building fortifications and bunkers on the hill known as LZ Snoopy. I was a member of Bravo Battery’s fire direction center (FDC) at the time.

Originally an engineer LZ, Snoopy was located approximately 10 miles south of the city of Quang Ngai. It was situated on a hill overlooking some abandoned rice fields and Highway 1, the major north-south road that ran through I Corps and paralleled the South China Sea coast.

As part of the pacification effort, American engineers were rebuilding many of the bridges and roadways that had been destroyed by VC and NVA forces operating in the area. The engineers were increasingly harassed that spring by the VC, who would set up roadblocks and collect ‘taxes’ from the local population at night. The VC also mined the roads at night and occasionally set up ambushes for minesweeping units. Every morning the engineers had to sweep Highway 1 for mines and booby traps. To provide protection and fire support for the engineers, Bravo Battery was moved south from LZ Gator, near Chu Lai, to LZ Snoopy.

The engineers were not very receptive to the ‘redlegs’ (a term dating back to the American Civil War, when artillerymen wore a red stripe down their trouser legs, like the yellow stripe worn by the cavalry) after the first fire mission, which knocked down the engineers’ motor pool tent and made it necessary to reinforce buildings and bunkers to withstand the concussion from the battery’s four 155mm howitzers.

The firepower of those howitzers also started to draw the enemy’s attention, and soon LZ Snoopy was subjected to periodic mortar fire. The outdoor movie theater the engineers had constructed had to be closed down. Relations between the engineers and the artillerymen were further strained when, due to incoming mortar fire, the engineers had to close down their mess hall and eat C rations while the Bravo Battery cooks continued to feed the redlegs hot food.

In April 1969 the engineers moved most of their unit to another LZ just north of Snoopy, leaving a platoon of engineers to support the artillerymen. When the engineers departed, Bravo Battery moved to the higher of the two hills that constituted the LZ. That hill had been occupied by an ARVN artillery unit, which had laid a minefield of plastic explosives around the hillside. The engineers ran one of their heavy bulldozers over the minefield in an attempt to clear it, but the steepness of the hillside made it impossible to eliminate all the mines. It was decided to leave the minefield intact and construct a new set of bunkers and sandbag fortifications inside the ring of mines.

During that April, the artillerymen were busy working to build new living quarters and gun pits inside the LZ’s perimeter. The hill was so rocky and hard that all the gun pits had to be built above ground, using sandbags and 55-gallon drums filled with sand. These parapets circled each of the four howitzers and contained two bunkers, one filled with gunpowder and the other with projectiles.

The howitzers all sat on their spin jacks in the center of each gun pit. During a fire mission, the crews could change the direction of their gun by picking up the trails and moving the gun on its jack until it was aimed in the proper direction. Near each gun pit the crews built their living quarters, which consisted of 10-by-10 buildings covered with sandbags and reinforced by mounds of dirt piled up around the sides. In front of each doorway stood a blast wall of sandbags that protected the door from direct hits by mortars and rockets.

New fighting bunkers were built on the LZ’s perimeter. Some of the bunkers were designed to be manned and equipped with M-60 machine guns, Claymore mines and hand grenades, while others were intended to be used as fighting positions–to be manned only in case of attack.

The weather was hot, and the constant work of building up the LZ, coupled with the fire missions at night, gave the artillerymen little time to rest. With most of the engineers gone, the men of Bravo Battery had to provide their own perimeter security for the first time. Everyone in the battery–including cooks; communications and motorpool personnel; men in the FDC, which functioned as the command and control center of the artillery group; and the gun crews–had to stand bunker guard duty. By May, most of the work had been done and the battery resumed a more normal routine. The men provided artillery support for the engineers and other friendly forces during the day and at night fired H&I (harassment and interdiction) missions in an effort to stop enemy soldiers from moving about freely.

On May 11, breezes from the South China Sea swept inland, resulting in a break in the hot weather at Snoopy. A cool night meant the gun crews would be able to get a good rest after their night firing missions. As the evening settled in, the FDC ran communications checks with the manned bunkers. Every half-hour the communications section phoned each bunker, which in turn gave the ‘all green’ code, meaning that everything was quiet.

Just after 2 a.m. the bunkers reported ‘all green.’ But they were all wrong. Two sappers had penetrated the perimeter without being seen and had occupied one of the unmanned fighting positions. Using a captured U.S. Army field phone, they tapped into the bunker communications line and listened to see if the rest of their unit’s soldiers creeping up the hillsides of LZ Snoopy had been spotted. After hearing the ‘all green,’ the two NVA signaled their comrades to launch the attack. At 2:17 the peaceful night erupted in a series of explosions as NVA sappers stormed the top of the hill, setting off satchel charges and hand grenades under cover of fire from 82mm mortars. Before the battery could respond, the LZ was overrun by a medium-size force of NVA and VC sappers.

The sappers were highly trained to penetrate defensive positions. They wore shorts and covered their bodies with a dark, greaselike substance to help them slide through strands of barbed wire. The sappers could rapidly go through many strands of wire in a matter of seconds. Their technique was to sneak up on a position and quickly overrun it before the defenders could react.

Sappers were usually lightly armed, relying on baskets of hand grenades, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and satchel charges to do as much damage as possible. Some sappers would run through a compound throwing their grenades to create confusion while others attached satchel charges to howitzers, communications bunkers and other important targets. Sapper units were among the most feared of the enemy troops in Vietnam because they could inflict heavy casualties in a matter of minutes.

The defenders made initial contact with the enemy in the sector where the engineers had their bunker. Five sappers were spotted in that area. At the same time, a number of enemy troops had worked their way through the perimeter and were moving freely through the LZ under the protection of heavy mortar fire.

One of the Bravo Battery defenders was patrolling his crew’s gun pit when the attack was launched. He had laid his M-16 against the howitzer in the middle of the pit and was walking around the perimeter. Suddenly, he heard a noise and saw a dark figure leap over the wall and enter the gun pit, no more than a couple of feet from him. Hidden in the shadow of the projo (projectile) bunker, the artilleryman could observe the sapper without being seen. With his weapon out of reach, he had only one offensive option. As the NVA sapper paused to look around, the artilleryman leapt out of the shadows, seized him by the neck and strangled him with his bare hands. No sooner had he finished off the first sapper than another sapper leapt over the wall. The artilleryman jumped the second NVA attacker and was struggling with him when another member of his crew shot the sapper dead.

The full impact of the attack was felt at 2:20, when three satchel charges exploded in one of the engineers’ bunkers. The artillerymen who were still asleep in their bunkers were rudely awakened by the explosions. Shouts and cries of ‘incoming’ reverberated through the LZ. The off-duty members of the FDC staff ran from their hooch, grabbing their rifles and steel helmets as they went, to man fighting bunkers on the western perimeter of the LZ while other men scrambled to their positions along the perimeter. Soon the explosions of Claymore mines could be heard, along with heavy machine-gun fire from the batteries’ 7.62mm and .50-caliber machine guns, as the defenders fought to prevent more enemy troops from penetrating the perimeter.

Some of the gun crews were pinned in their bunkers by sappers who stationed themselves outside the doorways and tossed hand grenades at the artillerymen whenever they tried to open the doors. Cooks, mechanics and the FDC section had to fight off the sappers and free the rest of the battery. Fierce fighting was soon breaking out all over the hill as the artillerymen and engineers struggled to regain control of the LZ from the sappers.

The NVA had captured some of the unmanned fighting bunkers and pinned down four engineers with heavy fire from their AK-47s and RPGs. Their satchel charges ignited ammunition stored in the bunker and trapped the engineers inside.

The battery medic, Pfc David Bozek, was trapped in the communications bunker. First Sergeant James Norris and 2nd Lt. Steven Rapier, the assistant executive officer, moved toward the communications bunker looking for the medic and discovered two NVA soldiers patrolling the entrance. Norris and Rapier opened fire on the sappers, pinning them down. Sergeant Norris then tossed hand grenades, killing one of them, while Lieutenant Rapier killed the other sapper with his M-16. They yelled to Bozek that the coast was clear. The three Americans then started running toward the burning engineer bunker.

All had been confusion at first. Fighting in the dark as they were, it was difficult for the Americans to get a good grasp of the situation inside the LZ. But the reali-zation soon set in that Snoopy was under heavy ground attack. NVA soldiers scampered through the battery, trying to attach satchel charges to one of the howitzers. Close-quarters fighting was the name of game that night, and for the first few minutes the sappers had the upper hand as they set up positions to trap the defenders. Explosions, incoming mortar fire and the cries of wounded troops had momentarily overwhelmed the defenders’ senses. But soon training and discipline took over. The Americans grabbed their weapons and rushed to defend the hill.

Illumination was vital to the LZ’s defense. One of the battery’s four guns was routinely kept loaded with an illumination round and pointed skyward, ready to fire in case the artillerymen needed to see their surroundings in the nighttime. But sappers had now taken control of the gun pit that had the howitzer loaded with illumination rounds. The gun crew crept toward their gun, and when they were close enough they rushed the pit. The enemy soldiers fled as a crew member reached the howitzer and fired off the first illumination round. Others followed, and soon the LZ was lit by the dim glow of flares from the howitzer.

The flares created a surreal light, and shadows appeared to be moving–shadows that might be enemy troops. At first the defenders fired at the shadows, fearful of what might lurk in the darkness. But soon their nerves settled, and they began searching for real targets. In no time, the men of Bravo Battery went from being a bunch of scared green troops to a disciplined force, bound and determined to knock the enemy off the hill.

As Bozek and Sergeants Norris and Johnson neared the burning bunker, they were joined by 1st Lt. Grady Stallings. The Americans immediately came under fire, which they returned in kind. They braved exploding hand grenades and small-arms ammunition stored inside the bunker to pull a wounded man to safety. But despite their efforts to free the remaining men, the air was soon filled with the screams of the three engineers still trapped in the blazing bunker. They perished in the inferno.

Private First Class Terrance Penick had been asleep in his bunker at 2:21 when he was awakened by someone shouting a warning that the LZ was receiving incoming fire. Seconds later a grenade went off outside his door, and Penick and Spc. 4 Robert Staples jumped up and headed for the entranceway. There, they were greeted by another grenade blast that threw Penick back into the bunker.

‘I looked to the right and saw an NVA moving around in the shadows, but somehow I managed to shoot him,’ said Penick. ‘After that, Staples and I decided to check the projo pits. As soon as we got to the first one, a grenade exploded on top of it, and we both got knocked down again.’

Penick and Staples defended themselves with hand grenades and their M-16s. They discovered a wounded cannoneer and quickly moved him to a place of safety.

Thirty-five minutes after the battle started, helicopter gunships and fixed-wing flare ships arrived. The gunships flew along the perimeter wire, laying down suppressing fire with their rockets and machine guns. The flare ships started dropping large illumination flares that turned the darkness into an eerie artificial daylight. This had a calming effect on the defenders, bringing the realization that if they could hold out until sunrise they would survive the attack. Always in the back of their minds was what could happen if the lights went out, so there were a lot of prayers said that night to keep the illumination flares coming.

To help their fellow artillerymen, Bravo Battery of the 3rd Battalion, 18th Artillery, fired their 175mm guns from Minh Long, about 20 miles away, and laid down a line of fire on one of the ridges that overlooked Snoopy. Their shells had a large bursting radius and were normally not used for close combat support. But the 175mm battery was the only friendly artillery unit that could fire close to Snoopy. Lying in the bunkers, Snoopy’s defenders watched as the shells from the big guns exploded on the ridgeline–an impressive sight.

The men of Bravo Battery were locked in close combat with an enemy determined to destroy as much of Snoopy as possible. Every bunker and all the other places a sapper could hide had to be checked out. Artillerymen unaccustomed to having to use their rifles soon mastered the art. Pitched battles raged over the entire LZ that night, with much of the fighting hand to hand.

Inside the FDC, the men on duty were busy maintaining communication with other U.S. units coming to Snoopy’s aid. While some sections stayed on the radio, others prepared for the worst by placing thermite grenades on the radios and the artillery computer. If the battle seemed lost and the hill about to be overrun, the FDC section had orders to destroy the equipment so it would not be captured intact. Code books and other crypto gear was piled up and thermite grenades attached. The FDC crew’s last act would be to destroy the radios and flee the area.

Bozak established an aid station in the command post bunker. As the number of wounded troops mounted–several with life-threatening injuries–the FDC section radioed for a medevac. The problem was that the helipad was on the outside of the perimeter wire and not accessible. The only spot to land a chopper inside the perimeter was a small area in front of the command bunker. But the approach from the south and east was blocked by the battery’s radio antennas, which could easily snare the helicopter blades. Any approach would have to come from the north over the LZ, increasing the risk of exposure to small-arms fire.

As the battle raged, a lone medevac chopper made its approach at about 3 a.m., flying a few feet off the ground. The only landmark for the pilot was the roadway leading from Highway 1 to the middle of the LZ. White smoke was popped and the headlights of the battery commander’s jeep flickered on and off to signal the chopper pilot where to land. Moments later the medevac helicopter set down in the middle of the compound. Wounded were loaded and the chopper took off after less than five minutes on the ground. The bravery and skill of the medevac pilot gave the men of Bravo Battery renewed confidence that more help was on the way.

Small groups of defenders continued to clear the hill of NVA and VC. By 4 a.m., the battle was easing up and the engineers and artillerymen were clearly gaining control of the LZ. Firing began to lessen, and by dawn it had completely stopped. The enemy soldiers disappeared as quickly as they had appeared. As the sun rose, the men of Bravo began to emerge from their fighting positions to start cleaning up the LZ. They had survived a night of terror, and many a soldier paused to say a prayer of thanksgiving that morning.

As the FDC crew started to relax in their perimeter positions around 5:30, they noticed enemy soldiers moving away in one of the erosion gullies along the hillside, about 25 meters from the perimeter. They quickly raked the area with M-16 and M-60 fire. Then Captain Robert Miehm, commander of Bravo Battery, ordered the men to cease fire as he issued the ‘Chieu Hoi’ order. (Chieu Hoi was the name of the program by which VC and NVA soldiers could surrender without reprisal.) The only reply from the gully was an RPG round in Miehm’s direction. The FDC section blazed away again, and within seconds there were two lifeless NVA bodies.

After that incident, the rest of the morning was quiet, and cleanup of the LZ proceeded. Snoopy was littered with Chicom hand grenades. Many were duds–the string in the handle of the grenades had broken, and the fuse had never ignited. As cleanup continued, more medevac helicopters landed to remove troops who had been less seriously wounded. The rest of the C Company engineer unit also arrived to help clean up the LZ and sweep the area around the perimeter for any hidden enemy soldiers. Helicopters continued to land, bringing in small-arms ammunition and supplies. High-ranking officers, including the division artillery commander, arrived on the scene to inspect the damage and to learn what had happened during the battle.

A team of graves registration personnel flew in on one of the first choppers and started the grim task of sifting through the rubble of the engineer bunk for the remains of the three engineers. The bodies of the NVA and VC sappers were placed in the scoop of a front-end loader and dumped into the bed of a truck. They were then taken down to the nearest VC-dominated village and dumped in the center of the settlement as a warning to the VC and NVA that LZ Snoopy was still alive and well.

The artillery portion of the hill yielded 25 bodies and a cache of armament that included 10 rifles, two pistols and 150 Chicom grenades. Another 12 bodies were found in the engineer area. Many blood trails were discovered leading away from the hill, and the bodies of another 20 enemy soldiers were found outside the perimeter wire, apparently killed by helicopter gunships or gunfire from the defenders.

Papers captured from the dead enemy soldiers revealed how the assault had been planned. They had trained for several weeks in preparation for the attack. Their plan had been to first destroy the FDC by tossing satchel charges into the bunker. If the FDC had been destroyed, the battery would have lost contact with the rest of the military units in the area.

The attackers, it was learned, had been instructed to destroy the bunker with the radio antennas on the roof. Two bunkers met that description on LZ Snoopy, however–the FDC and the engineer bunker. The sappers had attacked and blown up the wrong bunker. Setting off the satchel charges had been the signal for the rest of the sappers to start their attack on the four howitzers. Because the enemy had failed to knock out the FDC, the defenders had been able to direct other U.S. units in the defense of Snoopy.

The battle at LZ Snoopy was just one of a series of attacks in the southern part of I Corps that month. From one end of the Americal Division area of operations to the other, NVA and VC units attacked Americal positions. In seven days of fighting, the enemy lost more than 590 killed. Heavy rocket fire from 122mm and 140mm rockets and 60mm and 82mm mortars pounded positions in the area. LZ Baldy, headquarters for the 196th Light Infantry Brigade, was also attacked. To the south, near Tam Ky, NVA and VC forces overwhelmed a small outpost atop Nui Yon hill, only to be driven off with heavy casualties. When LZ Buff, northwest of Quang Ngai was attacked, elements of the 1st Battalion, 52nd Infantry, 198th Infantry Brigade, successfully repulsed VC regulars, resulting in 27 enemy casualties.

The attacks by the enemy were part of the plan by the North Vietnamese to demonstrate their determination to carry on the war. In May 1969, President Richard M. Nixon was meeting with the South Vietnamese to announce plans for peace in Vietnam. The fight for LZ Snoopy was just one small battle in the Vietnam War, but to the men on Snoopy, it was a battle for survival. Unlike his comic strip namesake, Snoopy had fought the Red Baron and won.

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